FALL 2002
VOLUME 5 NUMBER 3

MILK RIVER WATERSHED NEWS

Development Association Formed to Support Milk River Project

By Randy Reed, Chairman MRPDA

The Milk River Project Development Association (MRPDA) was formed to seek Congressional authorization for rehabilitating the Milk River Project. The MRPDA is a coalition of sportsmen, irrigators, tribal, and municipal water users. It is very apparent to them that without strong public involvement and support, the rehabilitation of the project will never happen. The St. Mary canal and diversion works are in desperate need of rehabilitation. Without this repair, the Milk River water supply will dwindle in reliability and quantity as maintenance costs for an aging system will continue to rise and threaten the economic viability of all water users and citizens in the Milk River basin.

The North Central Montana Feasibility Study is nearing completion by the United States Bureau of Reclamation (USBR). This is a golden time for the MRPDA to seek Congressional authorization and funding for study recommendations. USBR cannot lobby Congress; so it is our responsibility to persuade Congress that the rehabilitation of the project is important enough to justify the costs. Time is of the essence -- the structural integrity of the St. Mary system is in jeopardy. We simply cannot wait another decade while all the "what ifs" are analyzed and re-analyzed.

The Fort Belknap Compact is the best, and perhaps the only vehicle to obtain Congressional authorization to fix the St. Mary's system. Currently, the Fort Belknap Compact is stalled in the Department of Interior and needs to be nudged forward.

Members of our Association toured the St. Mary system in July. It was quite an eye opener to see the debilitating condition of the diversion works. As a result of the tour, the Havre Chapter of Walleyes Unlimited sponsored a meeting with Senator Baucus's staff member, Kim Falcon. USBR was present at the meeting and provided us the opportunity to inform Kim of the problems and needs of the system. Also, it was an opportunity to encourage approval and ratification of the compact. We thought the meeting was productive.

Much more needs to be done. We need to meet and obtain support from Senator Burns and Representative Rehberg. To keep this issue on the forefront of our Congressional delegation, postcards were printed en masse, describing briefly the problems that face the Milk River Project. They were distributed throughout the basin and were sent to our delegation by basin residents. A follow-up letter to the postcards, was also sent to the delegation last spring. The letter was also mailed to Secretary of Interior Gail Norton, which encouraged them to approve the Fort Belknap Compact. It is very important that we push the compact through the Department of Interior. Please call our Congressional delegation and local legislators.

In closing, to preserve our use of the Milk River Project water and stabilize the economy of North Central Montana we all need to work together to obtain congressional authorization and funding to rehabilitate the St. Mary diversion works.

INSIDE

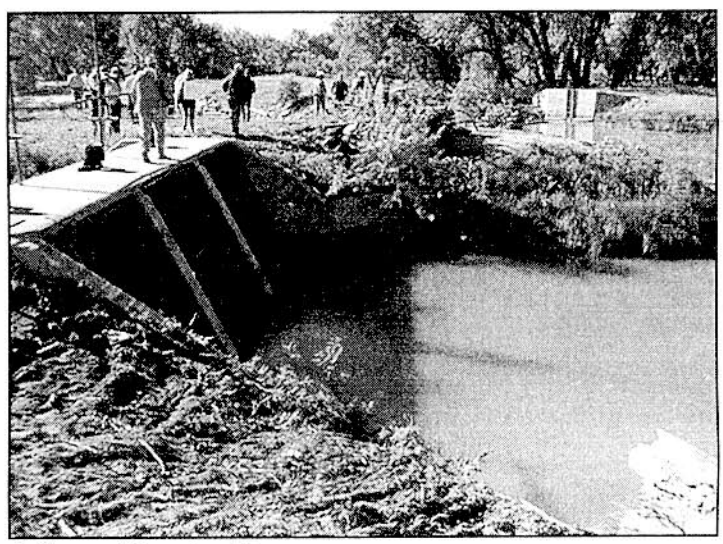
Milk River International Alliance "Heart of the Hi-Line Tour"

By Shilo Messerly, NRCS

The "Heart of the Hi-Line Tour" was held on September 11 and 12, 2002. Forty-five people from Montana and Alberta toured the reach of the Milk River from Fresno Dam to Vandalia Dam. A public forum was held in Malta on the first evening. As you probably know, the Milk River Project furnishes water for approximately 121,000 irrigated acres that extend 200 miles along the Milk River from northwest Havre to southeast of Nashua.

Highlights of the tour included stops at Fresno Dam; Lohman, Paradise Valley, Dodson, and Vandalia diversion dams; Harlem #1 Pump and Dodson Pump; Bowdoin National Wildlife Refuge; Chinook Water Treatment Plant; and Nelson Reservoir. A number of presentations were given along the way. Participants were able to see the many physical and financial challenges of delivering water through this large, but degrading irrigation project, as well as seeing the benefits resulting from it.

The first stop on the tour was Fresno Dam. Brent Esplin, a U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (USBR) engineer gave an overview of the dam. He informed the group that Fresno Dam was constructed in 1939, and designed to store 130,000 acre-feet. It stores and regulates water supplies for: nine Milk River Project Irrigation Districts; USBR pump contracts; Fort Belknap BIA Irrigation Project; municipal water for the communities of Havre, Chinook, and Harlem; Hill County Rural Water District; and Bowdoin National Wildlife Refuge. Over the years, more and more fishermen from across Montana have enjoyed catching the walleye and northern pike that are found in Fresno Reservoir. However, a 1999 survey revealed that siltation has reduced the reservoir capacity to 93,000 acre-feet, with average storage losses of 500 acre-feet per year.



Lohman Diversion Dam

Several irrigation structures were visited in the Chinook Division including Lohman and Paradise Valley diversion dams, Cemetery Siphon and Harlem Pump Station #1. Tour participants saw the damage to the diversion dams caused by the June storms, and were awakened when they heard the high cost associated with running the pumps as a sole source of irrigation water. In August alone, Harlem Irrigation District's power bill was almost $8,000.

The tour also stopped at the Chinook Water Treatment Plant. The Chinook and Havre plant operators explained how Milk River water is converted into drinkable water. The communities of Havre, Chinook and Harlem receive their municipal water supply from the Milk River

(Continued on next page)

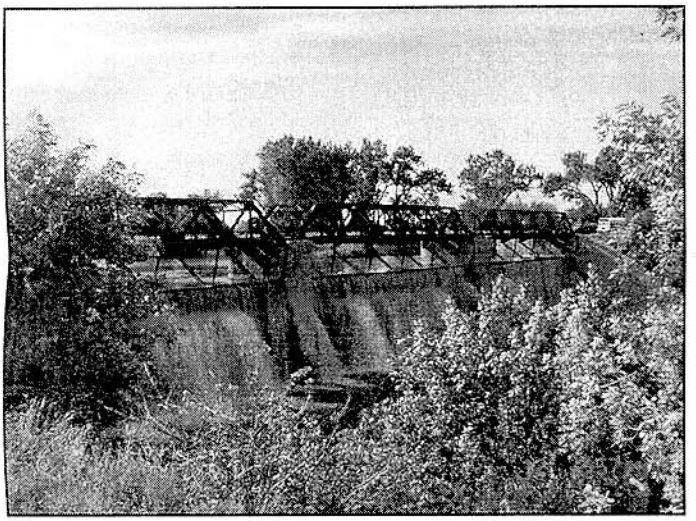
Heart of the Highline Sidebar

On the Evening of September 11, 2002, irrigators from Alberta and Montana along with State and Federal officials, held a public forum in conjunction with the Heart of the Hi-Line Tour sponsored by the Milk River International Alliance. Most of the discussion centered on water shortages in the basin. The main subjects talked about were the potential for development of Canadian water rights on the Milk River, siltation of Fresno Reservoir, rehabilitation of the Saint Mary diversion works, and the North-Central Montana Regional Feasibility Study. Total Maximum Daily Loads and watershed planning were also topics for discussion.

(Hi-Line Tour Continued from previous page)

Project. Their allotment is quantified in contracts with the USBR.

To emphasize the importance of Saint Mary River water to the Milk River System, a brief stop was made at a damaged section of pipe from the Saint Mary Siphon.



Vandalia Dam

Kay Blatter, Milk River International Alliance Chairman, and President of the Milk River Project Joint Board of Control, discussed the age and deteriorating nature of the Saint Mary diversion works. On average, 70 percent of the Milk River water supply comes from the Saint Mary River, and as much as 95 percent in dry years. The section of pipe is being moved around the basin to raise awareness of the extreme importance of Saint Mary River water to the basin's survival.

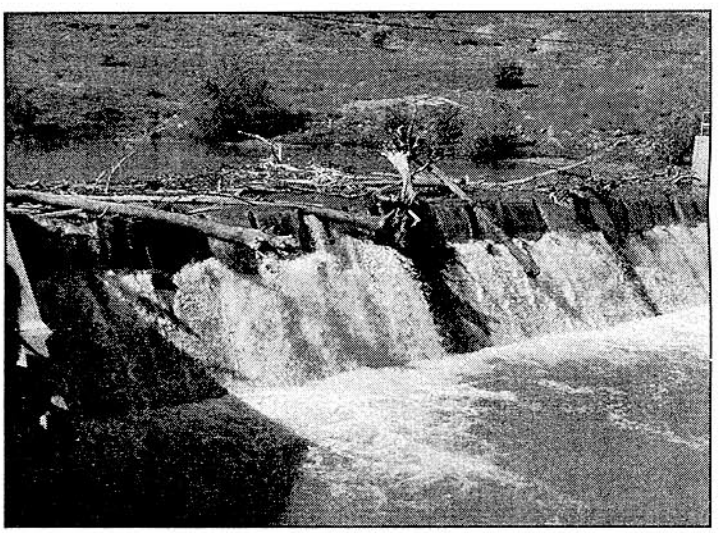
The second day of the tour started with a visit to Dodson Dam. Built in 1910, and rehabilitated in 1952, it is again in need of major repairs with an estimated cost of $2.2 million. Dodson Dam diverts water to irrigate over 42,000 acres in Malta Irrigation District. Additionally, Dodson Dam diverts water for the Dodson Pump Unit, Bowdoin National Wildlife Refuge, and Nelson Reservoir.

Mark Sullivan of the Montana Department of Fish Wildlife and Parks explained how fish and wildlife rely heavily on the Milk River Project. He explained that there are three Wildlife Management Areas along the project: one near Dodson; one near Nelson Reservoir; and the third near Vandalia Dam. He also discussed a number of state programs available to landowners such as paying for the construction of 8-foot fence around hay yards.

Two other stops were made in Malta Irrigation District. A brief visit to the Dodson Pump site, where water is lifted 21 feet to irrigate about 1,000 acres. The second stop was at Point of Rocks Reservoir, an in-stream reservoir in Dodson South Canal with about 1,500 acre-feet of storage. Deb Pankratz, working on the Canal Efficiency Study for the Milk River Project Joint Board, spoke on several on-farm efficiency programs. She talked about the Agrimet weather station and how, when used with Crop Water Use Charts, it can help determine crop irrigation scheduling. The Agrimet Internet site is www.gp.usbr.gov/agrimet_station_list.htm. Deb also discussed the Hanson Moisture Meter and Surge Valve Loaner program available through the USBR.

At Bowdoin National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), tour participants got an idea of the challenges facing the refuge. The refuge provides habitat for many species of birds including the piping plover, listed as an threatened species. Bowdoin NWR receives water from the Milk River Project through the Dodson South Canal. Annual deliveries to the refuge average 3,500 acre-feet/year, and as much as 8,000 acre-feet in very wet years. Bowdoin NWR cannot drain water and, as a result, salinity levels are so high that aquatic life and game fish cannot survive. The US Fish and Wildlife Service(USFWS) is working with Montana Department of Environmental Quality and surrounding neighbors to come up with a solution to the salt issue.

The tour visited Nelson Reservoir. Nelson Reservoir is a 79,000 acre-foot off-stream storage facility built in 1915 for irrigation on the lower portion of Malta and Glasgow irrigation districts.



Paradise Valley Diversion Dam

(Tour Continued on Page 5)

DNRC Water Resources Offices Serve the Milk River

By Mike Dailey

The Havre and Glasgow DNRC Water Resources Regional Offices provide local assistance and service on water rights, administering the water law dealing with—new appropriations, adjudication, and maintaining a central water rights records system. Other services include assisting the dam safety program, floodplain management, water management, and watershed planning. The Havre office serves eight counties in north-central Montana including Blaine, Choteau, Glacier, Hill, Liberty, Pondera, Teton and Toole. The Glasgow office serves ten counties in northeast Montana including Daniels, Dawson, Garfield, McCone, Phillips, Richland, Roosevelt, Sheridan, Valley, and Wibaux.

Havre Regional Office - (left to right) Craig, Marvin, Kraig, Terri, Bob, Dixie and Jay

Havre Regional Office Staff:

Craig Biggart, Water Resource Specialist – Verification Completion Project
Marvin Cross, Civil Engineering Specialist
Kraig VanVoast, Water Resource Specialist – Adjudication
Terri Peterson, Program Assistant (the real boss)
Bob Larson, Regional Office Manager – Havre and Glasgow
Dixie Brough, Water Resource Specialist – New Appropriations
Jay Johnson, Water Resource Specialist – Adjudication

Glasgow Regional Office - (left to right) Mike, Denise, Pam and Ann

Glasgow Regional Office Staff:

Mike Dailey, Hydrologist/Planner
Denise Biggar, Water Resources Specialist, New Appropriations
Pam Weinmeister, Program Assistant (the real boss)
Ann Kulczyk, Water Resources Specialist

Stop in or give us a call at:
Havre RO 265-5516 - Glasgow RO 228-2561
Or, if you prefer, visit our website at: http://www.dnrc.state.mt.us/wrd/home.htm

Representatives on the Milk River JBC:

Kay Blatter	Chairman	Fort Belknap Irr. Dist.	**Casey Kienenberger**	Member	Malta Irr. Dist.
Hugh Brookie	Vice-Chairman	Malta Irr. Dist.	**Ralph Snider**	Member	Harlem Irr. Dist.
Melvin Novak	Secretary	Glasgow Irr. Dist.	**Bruce Anderson**	Member	Paradise Valley Irr. Dist.
Lee Cornwell	Member	Glasgow Irr. Dist.	**Brad Tilleman**	Member	Zurich Irr. Dist.
Jack Gist	Member	Alfalfa Valley Irr. Dist.	**Joe Nicholson**	Member	Dodson Irr. Dist.

Coordinator's Corner

By Jim Thompson

I've been involved with Milk River International Alliance for one year. I've met some fine concerned folks as my understanding of watershed issues expand.

The Alliance has been involved with the initial development of a Water Quality Plan. We have gathered pertinent data and information concerning water quality in the basin. Now it's time for the Alliance, working with its Technical Advisory Group, to review this material and come up with the first round of recommendations. Once these recommendations are developed public meetings will be held with Conservation and Irrigation districts. Local input will be very important. The details surrounding the meetings will be disseminated well in advance. Needless to say it soon will be time to stop talking and START chalking, as your input will be very important.

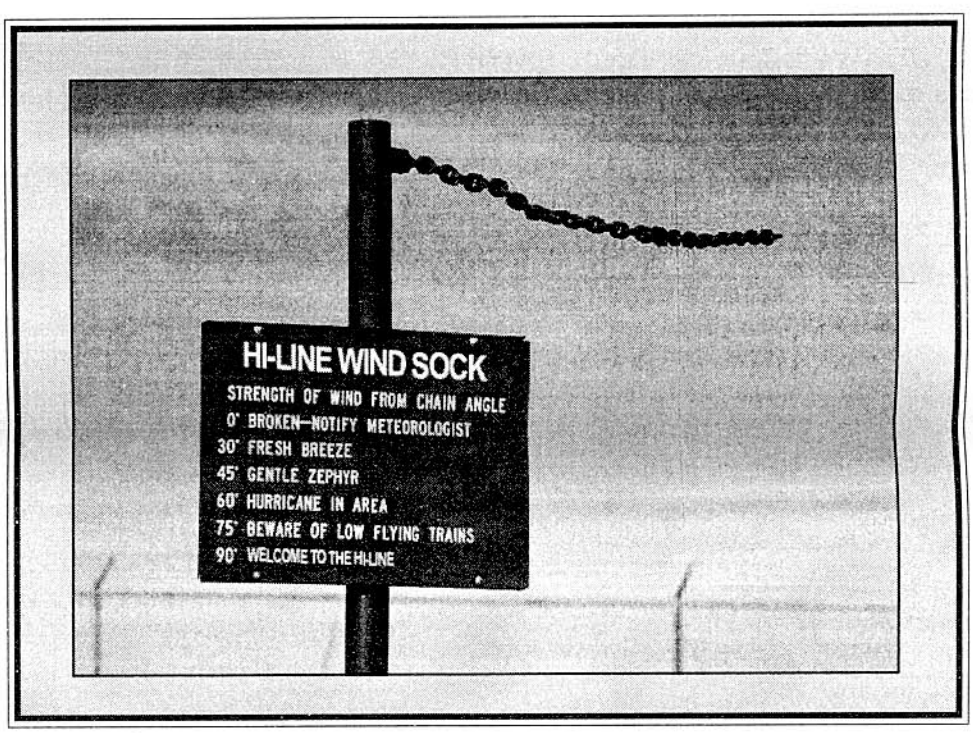
The Alliance is a group of concerned citizens. There is one requirement for Alliance membership: an interest in what's happening in the basin. As a member, you'll receive updates of all monthly meetings, which are open to the public. You'll be asked for your input relating to basin issues, costing nothing more than your time. To get on the mailing list, email Patti at MRIA@sudsol.com or call Jim at 406/367-5125.

I ran into my friend the other day that raises geese along the Milk. He seemed a little depressed and down hearted that some out-of-state hunters had mistaken his tame geese for wild ones and thinned his flock somewhat. Well I said, "It's rare but I guess things like that happen." "Oh," he said, "that ain't what's really bothering me. What's really bothering me is they were guided by an outfitter out of Helena." I scratched my head and said, "I'll be darned."

(Hi-Line Tour Continued from Page 3)

Nelson Reservoir has become a popular recreation area, especially for boating and fishing, and provides important wildlife habitat. Maximum reservoir levels must be established by May 15 to prevent inundating piping plover nests along the shore. Typically, 2-4 piping plover pairs nest there annually. Unlike Bowdoin NWR, Nelson was not designated as "critical habitat" in large part due to a close working relationship between USFWS, USBR and Malta Irrigation District, and a pragmatic management plan that has been in place since 1986.

The final stop on the tour was Vandalia Dam. It was built in 1917 and is also in need of major repair. Glasgow Irrigation District installed a hydraulic pump, electricity, and a telephone line, allowing remote operation of the dam from the district office located over 20 miles away. The total cost to automate remote operations was about $56,000, but will save labor costs of making daily trips to the dam and allow for more accurate water management, which in the long run, saves water.



MRIA extends a word of thanks to all the individuals and agencies that made this tour a success!

If you have ideas for articles or news items, please contact:

Michael Dailey
MT DNRC—Glasgow
Water Resources Regional Office
222 Sixth Street South
P. O. Box 1269
Glasgow, MT 59230-1269
(406)228-2561

Kristi Kline
City of Havre
P. O. Box 231
Havre, MT 59501
(406)265-9031

Wa[illegible]ce Elliot
Fort Belknap Irrigation District
Rt. 71 — Box 38
Chinook, MT 59523
(406)357-3353

Kay Blatter
Chairman, Milk River Joint
Board of Control
RT 1 Box 105
Chinook, MT 59523
(406) 357-2931

Gary Knudsen
Irrigator
HC 72 Box 7285
Malta, MT 59538

Milk River Watershed News
is prepared and published by
DNRC— Water Management Bureau,
Helena (444-6637)
Editor: Rich Moy
Graphic Designer: Devri Roubidoux

Milk River Project Storage on November 1 and Expected Storage on March 1

Reservoir	Storage in acre-feet	Percent of Normal	Percent of Full	March 1 Expected Storage, acre-feet
Sherburne	6,100	55	9	19,000
Fresno	48,300	123	52	42,000
Nelson	49,700	115	82	44,000

Storage in Fresno Reservoir on November 1 is the most storage on this date since 1999 and storage in Nelson Reservoir is the most since 1998. The above average storage in the basin should allow for a more normal start of t[illegible] tion season in 2003. Irrigation was started considerably later than r[illegible] the past three years because of the drought.

1,400 copies of this document were published at a total cost of $902.63 which includes $651.55 for printing and $251.08 for distribution.

MILK RIVER WATERSHED NEWS
DNRC—WATER RESOURCES DIVISION
P.O. BOX 201601
HELENA, MT 59620-1601

PRSRT STD
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
HELENA, MT
PERMIT NO.89

ATTN: MORRIS BELGARD
FORT BELKNAP INDIAN COMMON
RR 1 BOX 66
HARLOWTON MT 59036